

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry  
in Coventry Cathedral on Christmas Day 2014  
Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; John 1.1-14**

### **Introduction**

This Christmas there's been a lot of talk about Christmas Day 100 years ago when the fighting suddenly stopped in the First World War and peace broke out in the trenches. Instead of killing each other, men shook hands, exchanged gifts and played football together. It's got the historians' juices going arguing over exactly what happened and where. It's got the columnists commenting – the newspaper I read has been full of analysis on what it all meant. The playwrights have been writing – down the road Shakespeare's theatre has been running 'That Christmas Truce'. Footballers have been replaying the matches. And a certain supermarket has been salivating at the extra sales it might bring.

Talking of which . . . I know the Sainsbury's television advert has been a shade controversial but I admit to have found it very moving nonetheless. Perhaps that was because I first saw it with one of my sons. Moments before he had been joyfully playing a football game on his Xbox with a German friend from Dresden. The advert begins with a young British soldier – not much older than my son – and an equally young German soldier – also not much older than my son's friend – joining in the faint sound they can hear from each other's trenches – *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*, sing the Germans. *Silent Night, Holy Night* respond the British. In the morning they both rise out of the trenches of warfare, hands empty of weapons, to risk encountering each other as undefended human beings.

### **The undefended presence of God**

That is what the story of Jesus is all about. From the moment of conception in Mary's womb, to his birth in the stable, God in the Christ child steps into the world as the undefended presence of divinity, armed only with the power of his love, calling us to lay down our weapons of war and walk in his light.

The Word, St John tells us in his magisterial words, 'who was with God and was God' and 'through whom all things came into being' becomes human flesh and blood and dwells among us.

Silent night, holy night (as we shall sing later)  
Son of God, love's pure light  
radiant beams from thy holy face,  
with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

But it did not look as if Jesus was Lord at his birth. His mother was poor. Her husband was not his father. They were homeless, soon to be refugees hounded by one of the worst child abusers of all time. And it did not look as if he was Lord at his death. Religious authority would scheme against him. Legal systems would be manipulated to condemn him. Soldiers of occupation would crucify him.

God's Lordship, though – God's power and strength – is expressed in surprising ways – ways that outwit the politicians, ways that baffle the philosophers, ways that disarm the armies.

### **Stalingrad Madonna: God's solidarity in human suffering**

Another time when Christmas brought an unexpected moment of peace and hope in war took place just under 30 years after the Christmas truce in the trenches. This time it was further east in the biting cold of Stalingrad in 1942 when the worst battle of human history took place and two million people died, Russian and German. A young German soldier – was he the son of a soldier who found that moment of peace in 1914? – who was also a doctor, a pastor and an artist, was determined that Christmas would be celebrated in the thick, terrible, terrifying darkness of the siege of Stalingrad.

He gathered a group of German soldiers. They sang a carol. Its words were so reminiscent of peaceful Christmases back home that their throats began to stick and their voices fade. Then, into their silence they heard a Russian carrying on where they had left off and it gave them the strength to sing again.

They stood around a remarkable drawing that the pastor had drawn on the back of a large Russian map. We have a copy in the Cathedral. It's called the Stalingrad Madonna. A mother shrouds her new born child within her womb like arms to protect him from the danger around him.

That image has been my companion as we have approached Christmas and as we have heard of the brutality of conflict in Syria

where the light by which children should be living their lives is so low. And I have thought of this image as we have heard of children slaughtered in the massacre of Peshawar, where the life of so many young people has been extinguished. And this image has been with me as we have heard of Yazidi girls in Irak and Christian girls in Nigeria sold into slavery and raped repeatedly.

The image of the Stalingrad Madonna reminds me that the Word became flesh in a dangerous world. That God entered into the real experiences of humanity. That those experience of God extended into the extreme conditions of human hatred, betrayal and violence.

This image tells me that the suffering people of the world – the undefended victims of oppression and war, illness and bereavement, rejection and treachery – are not forgotten or abandoned by God but are bound together with God in a solidarity of suffering.

### **The victory of God's light, life and love**

The Stalingrad Madonna is framed by words on either side. On the one side it says, 'Christmas 1942 in the Cauldron'. On the other, it is written three simple words: 'light, life and love'.

The siege of Stalingrad at Christmas was certainly like a cauldron – a boiling pot of suffering, brimming to the full. But for the artist, doctor, pastor the coming of Christ celebrated at Christmas spoke light, life and love to the world.

The undefended presence of God came among us not only to be with those who suffer but to defeat the causes of human suffering. God came in Christ to be a victim of violence in order to become victorious over violence. He came into darkness to penetrate it with light. He confronted hatred with love. He endured death to overcome it.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. A more literal way of translating the original words is to say that God pitched his tent among us; and God invites us to step into that tent of God's presence and see the light, receive the life and encounter the love that God has for us in Jesus Christ – we are invited to dwell in the world with God: in God's light, in God's life and in God's love

That's only half of it, though. The invitation is more exciting than that. The calling is more noble, the challenge higher. It is put beautifully in a prophecy of Isaiah to the people of God that says:

‘enlarge the site of [the] tent  
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out:  
do not hold back: lengthen your cords  
and strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread out to the right and to the left,  
and your descendants will possess the nations and will settle  
the desolate towns’.

We are called to extend the covering of God's light and life and love throughout the world so that wherever there is darkness it is driven out by love's pure light; and wherever death is promulgated life is promoted and wherever hatred reigns love will dethrone it.

Another wartime video on YouTube (this time the real thing) shows a man in Nigeria wielding a Kalashnikov with which he has just slaughtered an undefended group of non-combatants while shouting ‘God is great’. It records him saying, ‘From now, killing, slaughtering, destruction and bombing will be our religious duty anywhere we invade’.

Not all religion is good. Jesus was hounded to death by religious forces. In the past, Christianity has been used as a reason to wage war and killing, slaughtering, destruction and bombing have been justified in the name of civilization and freedom.

But that is not the way of the Christ Child. It is not the way of the Word made flesh. It is not the way of those who dwell under the shadow of the tent of God's dwelling. We are to defend ourselves only with love's pure light, radiant from Jesus' holy face; and, as we wield those weapons of peace faithfully, we shall find that the wars that wage in our families, in our places of work, in our communities, in our world and in our hearts will begin to subside and peace will break out.

Christmas calls us to lay aside our own forms of warfare – irritation with our family, jealousy of our friends, hatred of our enemies *and conflict between peoples* – and to find a different, a more undefended way of relating to each other in which we arm ourselves only with the light and life and love of Christ:

How beautiful on the mountains (says the prophet)  
are the feet of the messenger  
who announces peace  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation.

May we fight for peace in the world, armed only with the weapons of  
peace: light, life and love.